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### Learning through looking: Icknield High School

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#### **Brief description**

Many features combine to develop outstanding provision and outcomes in the visual arts. This example focuses on one feature; exploiting visual communication to promote inclusion and achievement in a 21st Century, ethnically diverse educational setting.

#### **Overview – the school’s message**

‘At a time when the curriculum offered by schools to their students is under scrutiny and questions are being raised as to the worth of the subjects on offer, it is important to remember the importance of the arts and their impact on inclusion and achievement.

The basics need to be taught, but we want more than this for our young people. We want them to be filled with awe and wonder, to bristle with confidence and high self-esteem and to appreciate the beauty of the world around and the brilliance of those who have created and continue to create the society in which we live. It is for these reasons that Icknield High School has dedicated itself to the development and promotion of the visual arts for the last two decades and why it took the opportunity to be a specialist college at the earliest opportunity.

Over this period we have been privileged to work with inspirational people from across the arts world, who have, in turn, passed on their passion and knowledge to generation after generation of young people. In their turn these young people have flourished and gone on to great things in the arts industries thereby ensuring that the legacy, which this country has for being a centre for the arts and media, continues. In school the impact of the arts has been significant, not only in terms of attainment and achievement, but in creating a more harmonious community by bringing different cultures together and deepening awareness of the richness of cultures within our diverse, multi-ethnic school.’

*Chris Dean, Headteacher*

## The good practice in detail

This example provides an insight into the factors contributing to the continuous rise in students' achievement in the visual arts at the school; 95% of students left the school with an A\* to C GCSE grade in the subject in 2010, more than three times the national average.

### Consistently high-quality teaching and diversification

A team of teachers and support staff who are experienced, committed and talented specialists has enabled individual staff to develop their strengths, contributing to a breadth and depth of choice for students. However, while individual staff are encouraged to promote particular media they are also expected to ensure that provision remains coherent. An example is the transformation of classrooms into learning environments that inspire and inform.

Staff reinforce their high expectations by communicating visually through displays that promote students' curiosity and challenge, and their thinking about what might be possible. Assistant Headteacher, Jo Conway explains: 'Every visual arts classroom has a 'quality wall' (for Key Stage 4) and a 'wonder wall' (for Key Stage 3) that exemplifies high achievement and promotes high aspirations. We aim to provide an environment that instigates questions and intrigue about art and artists and where students are encouraged to take creative risks, be expressive and experimental. Staff are reflective as teachers and artists, sharply focused on high standards but open minded about how students might respond in the classroom and between lessons. Extensive extra-curricular opportunities are popular with the students, including the use of digital technology to engage boys and girls in active follow-up or lesson preparation that maximises their contact with staff in school. Strong relationships between staff, students and creative practitioners are commonplace and seen as fundamental to the success and spread of the specialism across the school. Creative practitioners who have worked with students in the visual arts often work with them in the context of their other subjects.'

Six artists-in-residence work within the school. They work alongside teachers in the visual arts and also have a curriculum role within a department. This vital link provides opportunities for creative approaches to teaching and learning, to develop and embed across the whole school the strategies used within the visual arts. An on-site art gallery also provides a stimulus and source of celebration for the whole school. For the past six years the 'Red Dot Gallery' has had a significant impact through a rolling programme of exhibitions that attaches equal importance to the work of practising artists, pupils still in primary schools and secondary students, including those that have progressed to A-level courses or careers after leaving.

Providing a visually stimulating environment inspires students, provokes questions and challenges perceptions. Different ways in which 'displays for learning' can impact positively on students are explored. Students are expected to make connections between their experiences and others' through display. Display zones within each classroom for both Key Stages 3 and 4 draw on assessment criteria, the use of media, different processes and connections with artists, craft workers and designers. 'Learning through looking' is seen as a fundamental and valuable skill, increasingly relevant in a world dominated by visual communication.

## Communicating visually

The changing focus of displays ensures that learning environments remain vibrant and stimulating. Teachers use visual communication effectively and in different ways; they all share a belief that students' observation, analysis and interpretation of visual information, complements the wider work of the teacher. What follows are some examples of how this approach has been employed in different specialist areas of visual arts in the school.

### 1. In textiles

Displays in textiles focus on concepts of particular relevance to the media used; colour, pattern and surface. Jane Corbett, a textiles and art teacher explains: 'I have found art displays a great tool in my everyday practice and use them regularly to refer to work by students of different ages and abilities. The students are inspired when they see a diverse



*Jane Corbett, Textiles and Art Teacher*

range of work produced by their peers and this gives them the confidence to produce something of their own. Creating the "quality wall" display has been particularly beneficial to GCSE students. It shows how assessment objectives can be evidenced, through outstanding examples of both coursework and examination work. Students respond positively to seeing the high standard of work and are intrigued by the materials that have been used. This in turn motivates them to try out new skills and approaches in their own practice.'

'The appearance and display stimulate creativity in students' work, sometimes subconsciously. The colour and vibrancy of a display can be particularly inspiring. Students are always commenting on the displays in my room, they notice the colour, embroidery, different textures, print and the feel of the work displayed, especially if it is fabric based. They notice if the displays have changed and always say if they approve or disapprove of the work and why.'

Pay Mann, the subject leader for textiles adds: 'I use my displays all the time, in the assessment of students' work, to demonstrate how a new technique can be used effectively in their work and to show how they can be more creative. The students pick up ideas all the time. For example, Year 10 students have been producing monochrome corsets based on architecture. They have embroidered these using ideas from the samples of work on display, they enquire about how techniques can be used and how they can use them in their own work. Using such high-quality displays helps to improve their own work and raise standards.'



*Pay Mann, Subject Leader for Textiles*

Students are proud to have their work on display, especially those who do not perceive themselves as confident in the subject. Showcasing their work in this way sets high expectations by inspiring and amazing students to produce the best work they can and make best use of their creative talents.

## 2. In art



*Angus McDonald, Art Teacher*

Angus McDonald, an art teacher says: 'I like to exploit the height of my classroom as I have a very high ceiling. Hanging displays can adjust the height of the room giving maximum impact and a focal point for students. A visually exciting classroom stimulates students and promotes learning. I challenge the idea that displays should be at eye level.'

## 3. In '3D'

Ellie Jackson, a specialist in three-dimensional work, explains how the emphasis of her displays on structure, form and spatial concepts are used: 'I have found my processes wall particularly useful. It includes examples of different materials used in '3D' and different techniques. When I am talking to the whole class about a particular material or technique I can refer to the example on the wall, or take the example down so that students can touch and feel the material. The displays also help with independent learning. When GCSE students are planning their responses to the project brief, they can refer to the wall and see what materials would be appropriate to use for their final piece. Some of my examples are intentionally incomplete, to show different stages of assembly, which is particularly beneficial for students embarking on their own creations.'



*Ellie Jackson, 3D*

## 4. In film



*Neil Joyce, Subject Leader for Film*

Film is another popular option at the school that uses static displays to supplement an extensive resource of moving images used in lessons. Neil Joyce, the subject leader explains: 'To enable a static display of a moving image, exemplar elements of a film, displaying the correct use of shot types, are displayed as snapshots on an A1 board. Subject-specific vocabulary indicates what scenes are used and why. Films produced by former students are a hugely powerful tool; students recognise and relate personally to the individuals in the movie. To aspire to be "the next Mizan" (a



former student whose work is much admired) is common. The work of successful students whose work contains the features that teachers value highly, elevates them to celebrity status and we invite them back to talk to current students.'

## Extending 'learning through looking' across the school

Film is also used to advance the principle of 'learning through looking' to a higher level of sophistication. Innovative approaches at Icknield are engaging students more actively in learning through the 'digital wonder wall'; a multi-functional learning aid aimed at inspiring students in an interactive way. These are the key features:

### ■ Inclusive

The 'digital wonder wall' can be viewed by everyone or just selected guests. It is available in many different formats including web-browser based, screen based, portable media and projection. It can be viewed on a mobile device, Ipad and anywhere that allows access to the internet or the school's virtual learning environment. Teachers can use interactive white boards with the 'wall', they can share the 'wall' on 20 individual screens, and they can provide a link for students to access the 'wall' from home.

### ■ Interactive

The 'wall' has been developed so that students can only get the best results through interaction. Most paper-based displays involve looking. The 'wall' uses sound, video and 'click' to create an immersive experience. Students can view work and then click on a video to see how that particular piece of work was created, interact with games or puzzles or just simply comment/blog about the work.

### ■ Easy to use

The 'wall' is simple and effective. It has been designed with the teacher in mind, who in turn knows each student and how to create a display that is suitably differentiated for them. So, for instance, the teacher can alter a display readily and then have up to five variations to meet different learning styles or to provide relevant material for the needs of particular individuals.



*Matt Trotman, Subject Leader for Digital Art*

There are many other aspects of provision at Icknield High School that contribute to students' outstanding achievement. Fundamentally, the subject area has flourished by offering a breadth of opportunities that meet the needs, interests and aspirations of a diverse student population. And students are able to specialise which provides a strong sense of ownership of courses and coursework. The high value given to observation underpins the use made of the learning environment as a resource for teaching and learning.

## The school's background

[Icknield High School](#) is a large comprehensive school in Luton for students aged 11 to 16. It is a specialist in the visual arts. Approximately 1,450 students are on roll. The proportions of

students from minority ethnic backgrounds and learning English as an additional language are high in relation to national averages.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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